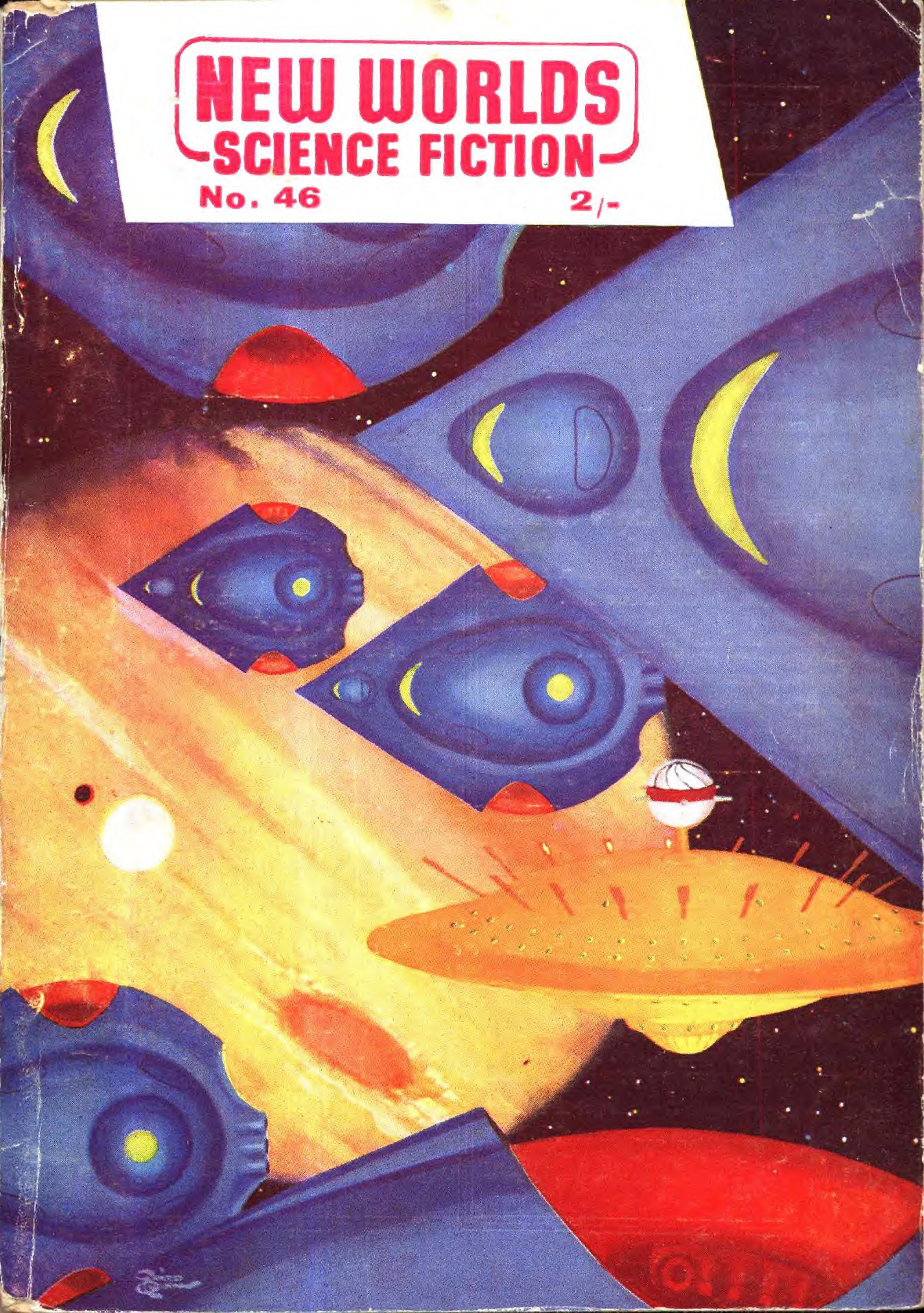


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Most readers will remember Chad Oliver's delightful short story "Any More at Home Like You" in the September 1955 issue. This month we present a gem of a story by him—anyone who thinks that the Martian locale story is played out will revise their opinion within the next hour.

ARTIFACT

By Chad Oliver

Illustrated by QUINN

Late August, 1971.

Far above a field in New Mexico, above the blue sky itself, a ship decelerated and floated down toward the Earth. The close star that had seared through blackness lost its nakedness and became the golden sun. White clouds touched the ship that had come from emptiness.

Hundreds of miles away, across half the state of Texas, Dr. Dixon Sanders sat in his university office and looked out the window. The cool breeze felt good after a hot summer, and the August rains had stroked green across the land.

He did not know that man had landed on Mars for the first time. He did not know what men had found there.

Three days later, Sanders got the call from Washington.

One hour after he had received the call, he climbed into a jet and was flown to a field in New Mexico. There was no spaceship in sight. He saw only a thick concrete blockhouse, two spidery structures that looked like radio towers, anti-aircraft missiles and sheds. There were jets patrolling the skies.

A copter lifted him four miles to a neat new settlement in the desert. The houses were white and compact, and concealed irrigation channels had turned the area into an oasis with green trees, grasses, vines and flowers. A big lettered roof sign read: *Welcome To Gila Monster Sinkhole*. A smaller sign was more official: *Greenacre, New Mexico. U.S. Government Property. Landing Prohibited*.

They landed.

A shaded roof path carried them across six houses, and at the seventh there were three military policemen guarding the roof door. They walked inside and a cool stairway led down into a rustic reception

room. Two more MP's opened a side door for them. Sanders stepped inside. He still knew a general when he saw one, and the impulse to salute was almost uncontrollable.

"You're Sanders?"

"That's right."

"A pleasure to meet you, sir. Have a chair, won't you?"

Sanders sat down, slightly stunned at being addressed as *sir* by a general.

"I'm General Ransom, Sanders. Intelligence. I want you to know how much we appreciate your coming up here like this."

"No trouble at all." Sanders wanted a cigarette. The general was a big, pleasantly ugly man with grey hair and sharp blue eyes. Sanders rather liked him.

"You realise, naturally, that what you see and hear in this place must be treated as top secret information. We're counting on your discretion."

"I understand that, General Ransom."

"Okay." The General paced across the room and then sat down behind his desk. He unlocked a drawer and took out a small box. The box was three inches on a side. It was ordinary enough in appearance, although it was metallic. The General drummed his fingers on his desk. Then, abruptly, he slid the top off the box and handed the box to Sanders. "In your opinion, Dr. Sanders, what is that?"

Sanders took the box and looked inside. "Can I take it out?"

"Certainly."

He took the object out and held it in his hand. It was a piece of brown rock two and a half inches long by two inches wide. He examined it carefully. The top of the rock was smooth and worn. The bottom had been neatly chipped by pressure-flaking to make a V-shaped edge. The flake scars were clearly visible. Looked at from the side, the object was slightly concave on its worked edge. He gripped it with the smooth top surface in the palm of his hand.

"Well, Doctor?"

"I assume this is important, for some reason?"

"Very important."

He picked his words with care. "It's made out of flint or chert, or something closely resembling it. The bottom edge has definitely been worked—I'd say by means of indirect pressure-flaking. In my opinion, it's an artifact—a tool made by man. It may be a scraper; that's a common tool used to flesh hides and that sort of thing. Hard to tell what it was used for, though. It's a fairly crude implement, but it's well made of its type. Nothing too unusual, I'm afraid."

The General leaned forward. "How old is it?"



Sanders shrugged. "Sorry, but I can't tell that from the scraper alone. Most of them are pretty much alike, and you'll find them all over the world and from the early Pleistocene right on down to the present. If it was found in association with bones or charcoal or pottery or projectile points—damn near anything—or if it was found eroding out of a datable geological stratum, I might be able to take a stab at it."

"It was found all by itself, on the surface of a desert," General Ransom said, smiling.

"Then dating it would be just guesswork, really."

"But it is an artifact?"

"I'd say so, yes. I didn't know you boys were so interested in primitive cultures."

"That," said the general, "would depend on where the primitives *are*."

"Apaches on the warpath again?"

"No—though we do have one over at the field who's a first class rocket engineer. I wish the Apaches were all we had to worry about. Tell me, Doctor, if you, as an archeologist, had to find out more about this little gadget—who made it, how old it is, that sort of thing—how would you go about it?"

Sanders frowned. "I'd go back to where it was found and try to find another one in place. If we could get one in a dig—excavate it, that is, association with some other stuff—we should be able to give you more information on it."

"Would you be willing to undertake such a search, doctor, if the government asked you to do so?"

"Certainly, if it's important. I have classes to think of, of course. Where did it come from, anyway—somewhere around here?"

"That's one way of looking at it, Dr. Sanders. It came from Mars."

He was a little slow on the up-take. Then it hit him. "But that means—"

"Exactly," said General Ransom.

He was a little surprised at his own calm acceptance of the fact that men had landed on Mars, but then he had been expecting it, really, along with everybody else.

But an artifact was something else again.

An artifact was a tool made by man.

Or by something like a man?

"Why me?" he asked. "I'm no spaceman. I like it here."

"I'll be perfectly frank with you. Our expedition was made on a strictly hush-hush basis; that isn't necessarily the way I would have preferred it, but with the world situation the way it is that's the way it had to be. Sooner or later, the news has got to be released. We've got a knotty little job ahead of us at the United Nations. We have no right to keep that artifact quiet, and when we talk about it there are some questions that have to be answered. Do you understand me?"

"Well, I see why you need an archeologist. Why me?"

"We can't force you to go."

"I realise that. I just want the reasons."

Ransom ticked them off. "One, you can be trusted. Two, we feel you're the man for the job—well trained, but with a shot or two of imagination. Three, you're in good shape physically—though an examination will have to clear you officially, of course. Finally . . . may I be blunt?"

"Sure."

"Your wife divorced you I understand."

The old pain stabbed at him, but he kept his face expressionless.

"That's right."

"Your parents are dead. You have one son in the oil business. You don't get on with him too well."

"Yes."

"You've chosen to work at a small private college. Your absence can be covered."

"In other words, I won't be missed if I don't come back."

"I wouldn't put it quite that way."

Sanders looked at the artifact in his hand. He put it back in the box and handed it to Ransom. "I'll do what I can."

"We're grateful, Sanders. You can pick your medal if you want one. And don't worry: we'll get you there and we'll get you back. That ship can carry three men. Your pilot will be Colonel Ben Cooper—he made the first flight, so he's the best we've got. You pick the other man. You know what we want, and you know who you can work with best."

Sanders didn't hesitate. "That'll be Ralph Charteris over at Santa Fe. He's thirty-eight, he knows his stuff, and he's technically unmarried. He's a research man, so nobody'll think it is funny if he disappears for a spell."

"Got you. Takeoff will be in ten days. You'll want to get things in shape."

"Okay."

The two men shook hands.

The ten days went by in a hurry.

He made out a will, a job he had been postponing for years, and managed to spend a day fishing with two friends in Matagorda Bay.

He phoned his son Mark in Houston. Their talk was unsatisfactory as usual, full of forced heartinesses. He couldn't tell him where he was going, and he was glad when the call was over. He didn't call Ellen.

The ship lifted on schedule. Within an hour there was no blue sky.

He thought briefly of himself: forty-two years old, on the thin side, horn-rimmed glasses. He probably looked a lot like a professor. He felt singularly out of place in a spaceship.

He looked at the screen. He saw cold stars and a frozen sun. He saw black distances and long, long silences. He saw his own life far

away and lost: a life that had been too lonely, and too fast. He stopped looking.

The atomic drive was soundless except for a high, irritating vibration that seemed part of the ship. Magnets kept him anchored and after an initial vertigo the weightlessness meant an annoying indigestion and little else.

They had some good bourbon, and it helped.

They were neither hot nor cold.

Ralph Charteris was a big blonde giant of a man, and little Ben Cooper always referred to him as the biggest mass on the ship. "Let's talk about rocks, Sanders," he said. "Tell me what the devil that scraper was doing on Mars—figure it out in true Boy Scientist fashion so we can turn around and go home."

Sanders smiled, sipping his bourbon. He liked to talk, although he knew it was just a device for getting outside himself. "I'll give you six fast answers, Ralph."

"Fire," Ralph said, chewing on an empty pipe.

"Here's the deal. A ship—the first one, mind you—lands on a supposedly uninhabited planet. It's mostly all desert and a yard wide, as I understand it, and the air is shy on oxygen. We've all been solemnly assured by our astronomical colleagues that people like ourselves couldn't exist on Mars. Oh, maybe some outlandish freak without any carbon molecules in his carcass, but not *people*. So what do they run tight smack into? An artifact. Nothing queer or strange or alien. Nothing to make them swat their helmets and holler, 'Them's Martians by gum!' Just a perfectly ordinary scraper—it's a miracle that botanist spotted it at all. So what's the most logical explanation, the one that strains the credulity the least?"

"It's a hoax," Ralph said quietly.

"You thought of it too, hmminnn? The simplest way for that scraper to get there would be for one of the men to have picked it up on Earth, carried it to Mars, tossed it on the sand, and then 'discovered' it. The botanist could have done it."

"I don't much think Schlicter was a dishonest man, Sanders," Ben Cooper said.

"Remember Piltdown," Ralph said.

"Exactly. I don't say that Schlicter planted that scraper—I just say that's the simplest explanation."

"Let's have some more ideas."

"Here's another: the artifact is not native to Mars, but was left there by a party of interstellar travellers. In that case, the catch is why they would leave a flint scraper behind. I can't figure a culture with spaceships and scrapers."

"Maybe they were shipwrecked," Ralph suggested. "Maybe one man was left behind, thrown on his own resources."

"Can't see it," Ben Cooper objected. "What's he supposed to scrape with that thing—sand pies? We didn't spot any animal life to speak of, except for those little things that looked like moles."

"Still, we can't rule it out," Sanders said. "Try this: there has been some contact between Earth and Mars we don't know anything about. A ship came here maybe half a million years ago, dropped the scraper for some reason, and hightailed it back home."

"This space travel does great things for the imagination," Ralph said sourly.

"I'm trying to name possibilities, no matter how far-fetched. I'm aware, I think, of the mythological nature of Atlantis, Mu, Lemuria, and the Lost Continent of Lake Erie. Remember the old dictum of Mr. Holmes: eliminate the impossible, then hang on to what's left."

"What is left?"

"Number four: just like the last one, but the ship came from Mars, picked up the scraper on Earth, came back home and dropped it. Maybe it happened a million years ago. Since that time, Mars has lost her civilisation and her cities are covered with sand. And *don't* tell me civilisations can't disappear."

"Sounds pretty gassy to me."

"They had to dig to find Troy. They had to dig to find some Biblical towns. You already have to dig to find some of the army forts on the American frontier—and they're only a few hundred years old."

"It's your theory, friend."

"Number five," Sanders continued, running a hand through his sandy hair. "Man evolved on Mars then migrated to Earth, maybe half a million years ago when water got scarce. In other words, the primate evolution evidence on Earth is misleading."

Ralph Charteris bit down hard on his pipe stem, and then remembered to relax. "You're kidding. How about the South African stuff—Australopithecus, and all that? How about Pithecanthropus? Sinanthropus? Neanderthal? Swanscombe? How come when they got to Earth they went back to living in caves and rock shelters? Dammit, Sanders, you're trying to make me sore."

"Not at all. Here's my parting shot: that artifact was left on Mars by some representatives of a galactic civilisation. It was left there on purpose, for us to find, as a kind of I.Q. test. They want to see how we handle the situation. How's that?"

"You're a wild man with a theory, Sanders."

"Listen, Doc," Ben Cooper said slowly. "What do you *really* think?"

Sanders looked at him and shook his head. "I don't know, Ben," he said. "I just don't know."

They didn't have much to say after that.

They started up a poker game with magnetized cards.

They waited.

Seventeen days later, the ship landed. They put on their airsuits and stepped outside.

There was no wind and they stood in utter silence. The ship had come down on the flat top of a mesa. Small, thorny plants with tiny green flowers were scattered loosely between worn outcroppings of reddish brown rock. The mesa was not high, and at its base was the desert, a motionless sea of gently rolling sand, so light brown that it almost appeared white.

The sky was a deep blue, very close to a cold black directly overhead but somewhat lighter near the horizons. There was one large dirty yellow cloud hanging just over the desert floor to the south.

Sanders shivered, although it was not yet cold. He blinked his eyes, grateful for the filter lenses in his airsuit. The sun was brighter than he had ever seen it on Earth, and it was a fierce, naked brightness that pelted the low hills and deserts with shattering attacks of light.

Here, in the lost immensities of a strange and silent world, his glib theories of a few days ago could find no expression. Here were fundamentals, and the raw truths of simplicity.

Quite casually, as though unimpressed by the enormity of the moment, a creature that looked too much like a gopher for comfort stuck its head out from behind a rock and surveyed them with decided suspicion.

Sanders eyed the gopher the same way.

"Well," Ralph said into his suit mike, staring out at the glaring wastelands, "I'd settle for a needle in a haystack any day."

A planet is huge, Sanders thought. You cannot imagine how great it is. Suppose some creatures came to Earth searching for artifacts, and all the people were gone. Where would he look? How long would it take? How many undiscovered sites are there on Earth, even today?

"Ben," he said, "can you see where the scraper was found from here?"

Ben Cooper shook his head. "I set her down as close as I could figure to where we landed before, but it's hard to get your bearings here. We're close, I'd say—maybe fifty miles. We could get the copter out and spot it—we left a big circle of rocks on the sand."

Sanders looked out. It was like standing on the beach of an ocean. There were winds on Mars, and dust storms. When the winds blew, the sands shifted. It was a lousy spot to do archeology.

"What do you think, Ralph?"

Ralph put his hands on his hips. Even he was dwarfed by the vastness around him. "No point in digging up the Sahara, I guess. The scraper was a surface find, and Schlicter said he couldn't find a site under it. If there's one artifact, and this deal is on the level, there must be another."

"I'll buy that. How about this mesa?"

Ralph shrugged. "We don't know what we're doing. How do we know where they lived? One place is as good as another."

Sanders examined the ground. "Lots of erosion. But those rocks and plants held the soil down pretty well. Probably phenomenal root systems on those plants—no water that I can see. It beats the desert. It *feels* like the kind of a place . . ."

The excitement grew in him.

"Let's have a look," Ralph said.

The three men split up and started to search the mesa, moving in the peculiar bent shuffle of a man trying to spot flaked stones on the ground.

The ship stood quietly behind them; it rested on the thorny plants and was nothing against a backdrop of emptiness.

The sun was white and cast sharp black shadows. The temperature was a comfortable fifty degrees Fahrenheit. There was no breeze and not a sound.

Sanders wanted a cigarette, but couldn't figure out how to light one in his airsuit. He moved rapidly, his eyes on the ground, looking for rock concentrations, or fired rock, or bones, or flake chips. He found that the slight gravity affected him hardly at all, except that he felt stronger than usual. He was content.

This was the part of archeology he liked best: you were alone, far from the cities, and the next hill was never too far away.

It took him three hours to find what he was looking for. By then the sun was lower, and it was growing cold.

"Over here," he said into his suit mike.

He didn't touch anything. Ralph and Ben came over in great leaping bounds, and the three of them got down on their knees and stared.

It wasn't anything much. The soil looked a little darker than the surrounding area, and there was some cracked rock. The darker soil made an irregular circle about four feet in diameter. There was a green flower growing in the middle of it.

There were flint chips.

There was one core, with long flake scars on it.

"Get the camera," Sanders said.

The night was very cold and filled with stars. Phobos was visible, but unimpressive. The men slept restlessly. Next day, they went to work.

They mapped the site and plotted a north-south line and used string to lay out the area in two-foot squares. They got their notebooks and centimeter sticks ready.

Sanders and Ralph got out their small triangular trowels and began to scrape the surface of the site, very gently. Ben Cooper watched. At first, he almost held his breath.

After six hours without results, it was less exciting.

They took it down in two-inch levels and filtered all the dirt through a fine mesh screen. They worked all day and found one flint chip.

The next day they found nothing at all.

Late in the afternoon of the third day, when they were ten inches down, Ralph's trowel scraped something hard. He stuck his trowel in the hip pocket of his airtuit and took out a small whisk broom. Very carefully, he brushed the dirt away. Sanders came over and watched.

The uncanny thing was the complete familiarity of the scene. They had both dug sites like this a hundred times, and with the same results.

Ralph uncovered a broken projectile point.

They measured its exact position in the site and photographed it in place. Then Ralph lifted it out and handed it to Sanders. The base of the point was intact, with two neatly chipped shoulders. Both sides of the thin point were nicely flaked. The tip was broken. The whole thing, without the tip, was a little over three inches long and an inch wide.

"Arrowhead?" asked Ben.

"Probably not," Ralph said. "Too big for that."

"Unless," Sanders smiled, "whoever made it was a giant."

"Cut that out, Sanders."

"Okay. Provisionally, it's a spear point or a knife. That's what it looks like to me."

"Bag it."

Sanders placed the point in a cloth bag and labelled it. Then he took up his trowel and went back to work in his own square.

When night fell they had discovered nothing else.

They stuck with the site for ten days. Before they were through, the gophers had got used to them and came over to watch them dig. The site played out at the four foot level. They had found two scrapers, one more broken point, and a piece of charred bone. The bone was not human; it was quite small and seemed to be a femur of some sort. There was no pottery.

"Well," Sanders said, "we may be able to get a radio-carbon date on that bone when we get back, but I don't know how good it'll be. Otherwise, we don't know beans about the geology—if that's the word I want—and there's no telling how old the stuff is. It wasn't left here yesterday, though."

"We *do* know something now."

"Yes. These artifacts are indigenous; nobody brought them here. It looks like we've got the remains of an old hunting and gathering culture, but we can't very well generalise from one site."

"In other words," Ben Cooper said, "there were Martians."

Sanders walked over to the edge of the low mesa and looked out across the desert sands, his mind filled with questions.

The silence came in from a long way off.

The desolation was old and patient and overwhelming.

"Come on," he said. "We've got a lot of work ahead of us."

Sites were not difficult to find.

The land had evidently been abandoned for a long time, and had been undisturbed. They spent a month sinking test pits and making surface collections, and then took the big-bladed copter from the ship and made two long flights in opposite directions.

Wherever they went, the story was the same.

Widely scattered artifacts, all of which could have been fitted into the Paleolithic of Earth without too much difficulty. Nothing that could be classed as Neolithic. No pottery, no traces of agriculture. No skeletons. No cities, no towns, no villages.

The land, Sanders thought, must always have been desperately poor. The food supply was uncertain, the water scarce. People must have lived in small, widely separated bands, spending every minute trying to stay alive. It would have been tough.

The lack of skeletons was not particularly surprising; old skeletal remains were always rare, and a man dropped more artifacts than bones in a lifetime.

They saw one large snake that vanished into the rocks before they could catch him.

"There's just one question left," Sanders said slowly, "and that's the big one. Are we dealing with an extinct form of life, or aren't we?"

"I was wondering myself," Ben said. "You take back in New Mexico and Arizona, now. You find lots of old places like the ones we've been digging up—some of 'em go back maybe ten thousand years they tell me. Just the same, the Indians are still there."

The silence of the centuries covered the land.

"The country seems abandoned," Ralph said, sitting on a rock. "These people weren't far enough along for space travel. So where could they have gone?"

"Let me ask you a question, Ralph," Sanders said. "If you're in a strange country and you're looking for a place where people have lived, what would be the quickest way to find it on Earth?"

"Go where the water is," Ralph answered without hesitation.

"Next question: where *is* the water?"

"Around the poles is the only place," Ben said. "We flew over all that country last time and mapped the ice fields. There's no water at all anywhere else."

Sanders looked away, across the deserts, beyond the horizons. He felt small and lost and old.

"Let's go," he said.

They left Ben Cooper with the spaceship, not entirely against his will. There was a strong two-way radio in the copter, and they all felt that it would only be sensible to hold one man in reserve.

The copter took off, a glittering bird under the morning sun.

The flight lasted three days. It was monotonous for the most part, an endless waste of silent sand, broken occasionally by low and rocky hills. They saw no animals from the air, and only a few cactus-like plants rooted in the shifting sands. There was one bad dust storm that boiled across the desert floor, but they got above it without difficulty.

There were no canals. There were not even streaks that might have resembled canals. The canals, Sanders thought, were like the Western Sea, the Northwest Passage, the Seven Cities of Cibola. Like all dreams, they were best seen from afar.

As they drew near the polar ice, even the days were bitterly cold. The sky was almost black and there were thin blue mists of ice crystals in the air. The desert sand below them became splotched with a dark, cold, swampy green. Thin hard snowdrifts were violet in the light of the frozen sun.

The copter landed near the edge of the polar ice on a narrow ridge of slick, mossy rock. The land closely resembled some parts of Earth, where you get above the timberline in cold mountain air, and water from glacial lakes trickles down across the grey wet rocks.

They got out. They heard the frozen silence and that was all.

Sanders looked around slowly, feeling the cold eat through his clothing and chill his feet. There was a lake of white-violet ice to his left, like glass in the snow and the rocks. He stared at it for a long time.

"Ralph, have we got any line in the copter?" he said into his suit mike. It seemed odd not to see his frozen breath before him. "Anything we could use for a hook?"

"We might be able to rig up something."

They found some wire and torched a hook out of a spare copter ring. Sanders walked over to the lake, his feet coming down uncertainly on the light, crisp surfaces. He took the torch and carved out a small, neat circle in the ice.

There was deep black water beneath the ice.

He put a chunk of canned meat on the hook and lowered it into the hole.

"Here goes nothing," he said.

They waited, stirring the water occasionally to keep the ice from forming. They got good and cold. The silence was absolute. An hour passed. Another hour.

Something hit the hook. The wire jerked Sanders' gloved hand and he would have lost it if it had not been wound around his wrist.

The wire cut through the black water with a *ssss*.

"Can you hold him?" Ralph whispered.

"I think so."

It was strong and heavy and full of fight. Sanders played it tautly, feeling it jerk against his wrist. He was sure he had it hooked. He began pulling the wire in, a loop at a time. His heart hammered in his chest and he was short of breath. If he could keep it from darting under the ice, snagging the line—

He saw him: a flash of gold in the cold black water.

He pulled, not too fast.

It flopped out on the ice and both men dived for him.

They held him as he squirmed under their gloves. They laughed and hollered unreasonably. They had him! They ran the wire through his gills and held him up, still wriggling heavily.

He was a beauty: a slim firm five-pounder, sleek and solid gold with jet black fins. He looked more like a golden mountain trout than anything else, and he was the most beautiful fish Sanders had ever seen.

"Get him in the water. We don't want to kill him."

They lowered him into the icy water on the stringer and then anchored the line to a stub of mossy rock. They looked at each other, grinning happily.

"There's a food supply here," Sanders said.

"Look!"

He followed Ralph's pointing finger and saw a small black shape on the ice. It slithered away as he watched, moving toward the

swampy country beyond. It looked like a cross between an otter and a seal.

"This is where the life is, Ralph. This is where he's got to be."

The emptiness and the silence closed in around them, but the wire into the water was taut and moved as they watched, back and forth across the hole in the ice.

Three days later, they found him. He was not three hundred yards from the copter.

He stood quietly on the violet ice, watching them.

He could not have been mistaken for a human being of the type that they had known. But he was a man, and could have been nothing less.

"Don't scare him."

The man was not frightened. He was small, only slightly over four feet tall, and warmly dressed in black skins. He held a spear balanced in his right hand, and Sanders could see that he had an atlatl to throw it with. His face was very white with a high flush of red around the nose and on both cheeks. His eyes were narrow and there was no hair on his face. He wore a skin hood that covered his head, neck, and ears.

He neither advanced nor gave ground.

He never saw an Earthman before, Sanders thought. He hasn't learned to be afraid.

"Get the fish," Sanders said.

Ralph hauled up the golden fish and handed it to Sanders. "Let me go first," Sanders said. "He won't worry so much about just one of us."

He took the fish and held it in his hand where the man could see it. He walked towards him, slowly.

The man stood his ground.

Sanders got close enough to touch him. He noticed that his eyes were brown. He held out the fish with his right hand. With his left hand he pointed first to the fish and then to the man. He smiled.

The man took the fish, sniffed it, and broke its neck with one quick jerk. He put the fish in a pouch he carried around his waist. He smiled back, showing white even teeth. He put his spear down on the ice and pushed back his hood. He took a bone comb out of his straight black hair and handed it to Sanders.

Sanders took it. He pointed to himself. "Sanders," he said slowly. "San-ders."

The man caught on instantly. "Narn," he said, pointing to himself. His voice, picked up by Sanders' suit phones, was high and musical. He said nothing else.



Sanders led him over to Ralph. He introduced them and the man repeated Ralph's name. Then he repeated Sanders' name and pointed to Sanders. He smiled, happily.

The three men stood on the ice, completely stumped by the frustrating wall of language.

He has a language, Sanders thought. Certainly, he doesn't live alone, because he is a man. His people must hunt and fish and gather what plants there are here. No agriculture, no cities, no nothing. This land won't support more than a handful. How many? Fifty? Sixty? A hundred? They never had much of a chance on this world. What happens to them now? What happens to them now—after they've met the men from Earth?

There was no wind, there was only the cold. Desolation was all round them.

The man in the black skins looked at the shining copter curiously. "Narn," he said again, and pointed.

Sanders turned to Ralph. "Guess he wonders what it is," he said.

Ralph pointed to himself, and then to the copter. He pointed into the dark sky and moved his finger in an arc to the ground.

Instantly, Narn grew agitated. He tried to talk, rapidly, and then abandoned the attempt. He pointed at the copter, and then into the air. His eyes were bright and excited.

"He thinks we came from the sky in the copter," Ralph said.

"Didn't we?"

Narn pointed again at the copter and tugged Sanders' arm.

"He wants to see it up close, Ralph."

"Okay by me."

Narn hurried across the ice, easily, without effort. Sanders and Ralph couldn't keep up with him. When they reached the copter, Narn was already patting its sides and trying to lift it off the ground.

"Boy," Sanders said, shivering in the cold, "we don't awe this guy any."

"Does he really want to go up?"

Narn settled that question. He pointed insistently up into the clear air. He grinned from ear to ear.

"Roll all the windows down," Sanders said. "We'll keep our suits on."

He helped the man into the copter and strapped him in a seat. Narn was not happy about the strap, but seemed to trust them. He looked around eagerly.

Ralph took the copter up five hundred feet and then loafed along over the rocks and ice and the wet green mosses. Narn stared from the copter to the ground and back again. He did not try to speak. He watched Ralph intently. The look in his eyes was almost religious in its intensity.

Sanders stayed at his side.

They had been in the air ten minutes when Narn spoke. "San-ders."

Sanders turned and smiled.

Narn pointed at himself, and then at the copter controls.

"This," Ralph said slowly, "is about where I get out."

"San-ders."

Sanders leaned forward. "How do you *know* he can't?"

"He's never even *seen* a copter before."

"San-ders. San-ders."

Sanders looked at Narn and wondered. "He's about the last of his kind, Ralph," he said finally. "He's lived on a world that's tough

beyond belief, lived there maybe for millions of years. He's used what there was, gone as far as he could in a hopeless ecological situation. He's survived."

"Sure, sure. I'm all for him. Adaptability. High intelligence. But no man can go from a spear-thrower to a copter in ten minutes."

"He's a different kind of man, Ralph."

Ralph shrugged. "It's your life. You get up here with him."

Sanders unbuckled the strap that held Narn to his seat. He led him to the controls of the hovering copter, squeezing past the white-faced Ralph Charteris. Narn sat down, cautiously. Sanders stood just behind him.

The man seemed absurdly small in the pilot's seat. He looked at Sanders. Sanders nodded, smiled, and crossed his fingers.

Very slowly, duplicating the motions he had seen Ralph make, the man moved the wheel and strained to reach the floor pedal. The copter lurched and lost altitude. Sanders started to reach for the controls, but Narn did not panic. Carefully, exactly, he compensated for the fall. The copter straightened. Sanders stumbled back and sat down.

"Well, I'll be damned," Ralph said.

The man piloted the ship for fifteen minutes, across violet fields of ice, flying steadily through the air. An icy wind blew through the ship, but Sanders hardly noticed it. He was completely stunned.

Narn, too, had found an artifact.

He took the ship back to almost exactly the position it had held when he had taken over the controls. He was tense and there was sweat on his face. It was terribly hot for him in the copter, even with all the windows open.

He let Sanders land the copter. Narn hurried to get outside and sat down on the ice, resting. After a few minutes, he got up and embraced each of the men in turn.

"Narn," he said proudly. "Narn."

The man in the black skins pointed across the ice and beckoned.

"He wants us to go with him," Sanders said.

Ralph was still trying to get his thoughts straightened out. "I don't know," he said. "One of us will have to stay with the ship."

Sanders nodded. "I want to go, Ralph. I'll take the pocket radio and throw out a beam so you can track me. Will you give me twenty-four hours, and then come and get me?"

Ralph hesitated. "Okay, Sandy," he said finally. "You watch yourself. These boys are nothing to fool around with."

Sanders smiled at Narn. "We'll get along," he said.

They shook hands, and Sanders set off with Narn across the violet ice. The bitter cold ate into him, turning his bones to ice.

They went a long, long way, across the cold and the rocks and the silences. Sanders felt his age, and it was hard for him to keep up. He damned his inability to talk.

He had never seen such loneliness.

Here, Sanders thought, here before me is the ultimate in isolated cultures. Here is a culture that has had to figure it all out for itself, with no help from anywhere. Here is a man who flew a copter the first time he saw one. Here is a simple man that some would call a savage. What might he become—now? How far might we go, together?

It took them three hours. Sanders was sore and his feet were numb with cold before they came to a valley of ice and rocks. The excitement of what he saw revived him a little.

The valley was pocked with caves: black holes against the faded light of the faraway sun.

They picked their way up a smoothly inclined path and paused before a cave entrance. Sanders couldn't see a thing, but Narn took him by the arm and led him inside.

Some twenty paces beyond the outside hole they came to what could only be called a door. Narn pressed three places on it very carefully and it swung open. A soft green glow spilled through the opening and in its gentle light Sanders could see that the door was beautifully made of hides stretched over a bone frame.

They walked through semi-darkness now, their footsteps hollow in the vault of the rocks. Gradually, the greenish light shifted to a warm yellow. Sanders noticed that the source of the illumination was hidden in the cave roof over their heads: glowing rocks that seemed to be built into the cave itself. He guessed that the rocks were of natural origin, but their cunning arrangement betrayed the revising hand of man. He knew little enough about indirect lighting, but this was as efficient a system as he had ever seen.

They stepped down into a large, well-lighted room. A tiny fire—hardly large enough to roast a marshmallow comfortably—flickered in the centre, and around it sat a woman and a child. Smaller caves branched from the cavern and lost themselves in the rocks.

Sanders saw something that took his breath away. The child was holding a toy cart in his arms.

The cart had wheels on it.

God, he thought. A Stone Age culture lost in the ice, and a toy cart with wheels. It had to be a toy, of course—they have no domesticated animals to pull a real cart. Narn's people are so few, so isolated. All his inventions had to come from a handful of people, without help from outside. There was a brain in that skull . . .

He noticed a light sled, with bone runners, standing against a wall. After the wheeled cart, it came as something of an anticlimax—though it was certainly more useful in the polar ice and snow.

“San-ders,” Narn said.

The woman took her child’s hand and moved back, shyly. She stood by a basin of crystal-clear water, her eyes on the stranger. She said nothing.

Sanders stood still, uncertain what to do. He felt as though he had stepped backward in time a million years, back through an enchanted cave that wound through ageless rock, back through history to an age when man was only a whisper in the wind . . .

He felt his palms sweating inside his airsuit.

Narn shook his head. “Don’t afraid,” the man in the black, sewn skins said carefully. “Don’t afraid, San-ders.”

He’s learning our language already ! What have we found ?

A hand touched his arm. He started, surprised back to reality. Narn’s boy was smiling gravely, pulling at his sleeve.

Sanders walked slowly to the centre of the room, and sat down before the tiny fire. He saw that the fire was really a kind of lamp—a stone dish of fat with a wick in it. Narn’s woman took her place opposite him. There was only friendliness in her eyes.

Somehow, something passed between them. A little of the loneliness that Sanders had always had with him melted and was gone.

The lamp-fire threw steady shadows on the cave walls. Narn sat down by his side.

Sanders was suddenly very aware of his exhaustion, but he couldn’t relax. His body ached with cold and fatigue, and his mind was so saturated with emotion that he felt a certain blankness. He was vaguely hungry, but he could not eat in his suit. He was tired, with dark circles under his eyes, but he was not sleepy. He felt curiously at home.

He sat there, smiling, and he was glad that words were not necessary. Finally, he stretched out by the tiny fire, looked at Narn, and closed his eyes.

Sleep was a long time coming, and when it came it was nothing to write home about. Solid rock is not the ultimate in mattresses, and he was keyed up to a point where he could not relax. He dozed fitfully, and his own spasmodic snores woke him up twice. His stiff, aching body did the trick the third time, and after that he knew that he had had all the sleep he was going to get.

He lay still, trying to keep his thoughts from bouncing back and forth between scrambled eggs and gargantuan steaks. He listened to the silence.

"San-ders?"

He looked up. Narn was squatting by his side.

"I'm awake," Sanders said, not knowing whether or not he would be understood. "You have insomnia too?"

Narn frowned at the last question, evidently storing it away for future reference. He pointed to one of the caves that branched out from the central cavern. "Come?"

Sanders got up. His body was one large ache.

Narn led him across the floor of the room, and into a dark hole. The passage was narrow and poorly lighted at first, but it gradually broadened as they walked. Sanders felt a little better. He guessed that Narn was going to show him something—another family, perhaps, or even an underground river.

The cave opened up, abruptly, into a high cavern perhaps fifty yards in diameter. The light was astonishing—soft greens and yellows and pinks, washing down from glowing rocks set into the very roof of the chamber.

Narn stopped and pointed.

Sanders suddenly forgot his pains and his weariness. He held his breath so long that the blood pounded in his forehead before he remembered to breathe again. He said nothing, for what he saw was beyond words.

The walls were alive. A man smiled down on him, and he could see his even white teeth and the glint of humour in his brown eyes. A landscape of violet ice lost itself in frozen immensities. A golden fish twisted in dark water, rising to a lure. A yellow storm boiled across a bleak desert, and cold stars were serene and splendid in the heavy velvet of an arctic night.

It was beyond reality, beyond his wildest dreams.

Paintings, yes—but you had to remind yourself of that. There colours were vividly real, and enhanced by a masterly use of the light from the glowing rocks. The perspective was perfect, the style naturalistic.

That wasn't all. There were neat, geometrical marks in bands under the paintings. Writing, beyond a doubt, covering panel after panel—and there were more caverns beyond.

Written history, on the walls of a cave—going back how many hundreds of thousands of years?

There were other marks that looked suspiciously like mathematics, a series of triangles that almost had to be geometry.

Sanders sat down, right in the middle of the cavern. He was stunned, and more than that. The toy cart had been enough of a jolt, even after Narn had flown the copter. After all, toy carts had been found in

Mexico archeologically, and the main differences were in the relative sizes of the two populations, and in their respective degrees of isolation.

This was a different kettle of fish. This was almost a miracle.

There was an excellent naturalistic cave art in the Upper Paleolithic of Europe, but it was a far cry from the paintings in *this* cave. And the Cro-Magnon were millenia away from writing, to say nothing of mathematics. Sanders sat there, lost in the rush of his thoughts.

Even on Earth, you had to be careful when you reconstructed a culture solely from what survived of their technology. The name of the Australian kinship systems could never be forgotten; the Maya invented the concept of zero with a Neolithic economy. And here were a people blocked technologically by a hopeless environment, forced to channel their cultures along other lines . . .

A new kind of people.

"You like?" asked Narn.

He watched Sanders with pleasure sparkling in his eyes.

"I like," Sanders said fervently. "More?"

Narn smiled, and led the way into another cavern lost in the rock beneath the ice.

Sanders almost forgot about Ralph Charteris and the copter. When he and Narn walked back through the central cavern and out into the valley, they had only a few minutes to spare.

They stood in the long valley with the sky almost black above them. The cold was bitter and very still. A thin blue mist of ice crystals was motionless against the snow. A cold, hard world.

Sanders looked into Narn's eyes, and saw there a wordless hope. Sanders knew that hope.

When the copter came, a dot against the black sky, they both knew that one chapter had ended and that a new one had begun.

It was *their* copter now.

Sice by side, they waited for it to land.

Far above them, shining through the pale disc of the sun, the stars burned in an ocean of loneliness.

Chad Oliver.